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FERNALD LIVING HISTORY PROJECT
Transcript

Name: Hillery Webb

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Tape: #74

Project Number 20012

Tape FLHP0171

08:01:04

(Cameraman – And speak.)

Q:

All right. If you could just give us your name and spell it so we know we have it right.

A:

My name is Hillery Webb Sr. It is spelled H-I-L-L-E-R-Y W-E double B.

Q:

Great now we know we have that right. And you can just talk to me; you don't have to worry about the camera at all. Like I tell everybody ignore the elephant in the corner.

A:

The elephant in the corner okay, we are talkin' about the camera aren't we?

08:01:31

Q:

That's what I say anyway. Um, first of all if you can give us a little bit of background, where you were born and where you grew up and where you went to school.

A:

I was born in Clay County, Kentucky. Of course we moved a lot when I was very small. We lived in the old hospital building in Cincinnati for I don't know how many years but then we went back to Kentucky. My dad used to work at Champion Paper.

08:02:01

A:

And I came back from Kentucky when I was 12 years old. And I didn't go back. I went to work in the plant when I was 14 years old in line to a bunch of people to get in but I was as big hard as a rock briar and I could do the job.

08:02:20

Q:

Tell us a little bit about working at Brenneman.

A:

As far as the Brenneman Company I started there like I say uh 14 when I started there. Now, during the war I cut sleeping bags, I was a cutter and designer and pattern maker. There was only one man in there but there was probably 300 women with sewing machines sewing these sleeping bags and hammocks and parachutes and toe _____ and Eisenhower jackets and shirts and shorts.

08:02:48

A:

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For everybody that was over there during the war. I was there 11 years, it's a good place to work. And the women they used to like I said they would, if one of them, it was all piecework, the more they ran the more they made. And one of them had run down material a little bit low and some of the other girls was making more than they were, they'd get started crying.

08:03:14

A:

And you'd see all the supervisors come try to calm them down. It was funny. But that's about all the experience I had at, at Brennaman's. And from Brennaman's I worked for Paul Christensen's wife, she run the sewing machine there at Brennaman and like I say when the war was over why I was out of a job. I was not out of a job but I was cutting back to a laborer and I didn't like that too well.

08:03:45

A:

She said to me, she said, "why don't you go out to Cincinnati Gear," said, "my husband he'll." I said, "I don't know nothing about gears or machines." She said, "well I can talk to Paul, he's the owner of the plant." I went out and talked to him and he said, "what do you know?" I said, "nothing." He said, "can you read a pair of mikes?" I said, "no, but I'm willing to learn."

08:04:09

A:

He said, "are you willing to learn every machine in this shop?" I said, "If that's what you'd like for me to do, I will do that and I will learn." He said, "I need a man that when a man's off I can say, you run that machine tonight or you make gears over here." And he said, "If you can do that I'll hire you." I said, "I believe I can." Well within a year's time I could set up and operate and run anything in that shop.

08:04:36

A:

Then where, something happened, a bunch of us got laid off and I went on to Ford Motor Company and got a job and worked there from 1950 to 1954 and quit and went to Ford, I went to Fernald. Art Medic was the cause of that, he was my supervisor at Ford. He uh for some reason he left. I used to accuse him of getting fired. I don't know if that happened, but he left anyhow.

08:05:08

A:

But he called me, he said, "well we need a set-up man and the screw machines." He said, "why don't you come out?" I said, "well, they were laying me off every few weeks at Ford" and I said, "I'm gonna come out and talk to ya." So I went out, my dad and I and of course they hired me, but they didn't hire my dad. I'm still working at Ford of course and 90 days later you know you had to get a Q clearance.

08:05:34

A:

Why they called me to Fernald and I was still working Ford second shift. I said well, I'll work both places as long as I can. So I was late every day getting into Ford but they had another layoff at Ford and I said I'd just stay at Fernald. And after I made my mind up to stay at Fernald, why they called me back to Ford and I don't think they had another layoff. I didn't go back. So that's what happened. That's the

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way I wound up at Fernald.

08:06:04

Q:

Tell me a little bit about your interview, when you went in for your interview.

A:

Well, we went in for interview, I guess it was eight of us. Well they talked and he said, I asked him about the place and he said, "well, there's low-grade uranium," he said, "but there's nothing here that will hurt ya." He said, "you'll get more from your watch or the sun than you could ever get from Fernald."

08:06:30

A:

Well I took his word for it but he said the only thing that could happen it could make you sterile. Well there was more babies born that year that's ever been known from Fernald. But I don't think it made anybody sterile. So I guess that was about the end of the interview.

08:06:53

Q:

Tell us about your first day on the job, what was that like?

A:

Well the first day on the job when I walked in the machine shop, I had been used to working in a machine shop, at Cincinnati Gear. I said to myself this is no machine, what is this _____. And of course I was a laborer. I don't believe they knew I worked there for a month. But after about a month, why they did get straightened up and I, I was a laborer there.

08:07:28

A:

Getting to meet everybody and it was, I don't know really, it was nice. And you, if you wanted to work overtime all you had to do is go over there and say I'd like to work 16 hours tonight. And we did a lot of those. And I was making good money and I was just as happy as I could be. I was getting my bills paid, I was feeding the kids good and buying nice clothes for them, paying on an automobile or two, a boat, home. I was doing real good.

08:08:02

Q:

Tell us a little bit about your responsibilities day to day, what did you have to do in your job?

A:

Well, at first, when we first went there, like I said I was a laborer and then we moved up to helper. And you loaded _____. Then from there you moved up to a stamper which you stamped the ingot number on each and every one of those slugs that was cut. Then from there you went to an operator and you was responsible to make certain that you, way it came out of the rolling mill it would come out in _____ rods and they put them in a flat pan.

08:08:37

A:

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And when you loaded them onto the machine to run 'em you made certain that you kept 'em all the way they was rolled. And you got rod number 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 and 6. You had to mark 'em like that when you run 'em on the machine. You stamped 'em and you stamped the ingot number on them. You was responsible for that.

08:08:59

A:

Of course then when I went to set-up man where you was responsible to make certain that all the machines run, so I guess that's about the size of it.

08:09:13

Q:

Now you mentioned getting a Q clearance, tell us what that was all about.

A:

Well, when you hired in, a Q clearance, I didn't really know what it was about but I know it took 90 days to get. You had to be cleared and uh of course they told us in the interview, I didn't tell you that, but if you said anything to your wife, your kids or your friends you would go to the penitentiary for 10 years and a \$10,000 fine.

08:09:42

A:

Well, I never talked too much anyhow so I just, and most of the people around us and myself we didn't know what we were doing really. We was just doing what we were told. But most of the people around there thought we was making feed in there for cattle or dogs or something 'cause they had the big sign up there, the checkerboard sign on it. And actually nobody asked too much so you didn't have to say anything.

08:10:15

Q:

How much did you know about the process when you started at Fernald?

A:

I didn't know anything about the process. I knew how to run the machines but I didn't know anything about the uranium or what it would possibly do to ya or anything about it. I know when we got started getting those slugs back from, I don't know where they came from but they were wrapped in lead. And we would cut the lead off of them and there was plutonium under it.

08:10:42

A:

I didn't have enough sense to know that and nobody else did and they didn't tell us. We put slugs in a machine, in a _____ and we'd turn that lead off the outside of 'em. Then we'd wind up with a small slug about eight inches long. And where it went from there I don't know, I thought it went on for remelt. Into the chemical department where they remelt it and we made it into ingots. That's all I know about it. They didn't tell you much. Like I said before, if they knew they sure didn't tell ya.

08:11:23

Q:

Did you know where that particular material came from?

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A:

No I did not. I know they say that some of the material was out there in the pits came from when they dropped the bomb. I knew that, but they told us that, that's all I knew. But they never told us it would hurt us anyhow. We used to climb all over those pits.

08:11:50

Q:

Tell us a little bit about some of the safety hazards that I guess now looking back you feel are...

A:

Well we had not too many, we had a safety meeting once a month but they made sure, oh they would tell us if you get a cut on your finger or you get a bruised knee or anything that you do be certain that you report it. We don't want no down time accidents, go to medical and if you broke an arm or a leg they would keep you there.

08:12:21

A:

Of course it didn't happen to me but it did happen to some people. They'd take you over to medical and then you'd stay there. You didn't go home, you stayed there.

08:12:34

Q:

And what was the purpose of keeping you on site with an injury?

A:

Well I never knew that. I thought maybe it was just for safety record, I don't know. We used to get a lot of safety rewards if we didn't have a down time or an accident that caused shut the plant. We used to wind up outside an awful lot in the later years before I left there. I'd say I left there in '69, we'd get a lot of smoke and they'd run us out in the field for an hour or two but then we was right back as soon as the smoke would clear.

08:13:12

A:

But after I went back in '82 National Lead had left and Westinghouse was in there. Then we had Geiger counters that would tell you how much radium was around. And we didn't have that under National Lead. I know we used to put it on our clothes, you'd go over and you'd get clean clothes when you come over to the shop and your clothes was hotter than the shop.

08:13:43

A:

The Geiger counter go plum out of site when you put it against your clothes and your shoes. Of course your shoes, you wore them until you wore them out. And they were hot. And our badges, that's another thing I was a little bit worried about. The badges, of course we wore the badge you know and you wore it in there all the shift and you wore it home.

08:14:05

A:

You would throw it up on the dresser or the cabinet and the kids would get it. And I asked them, the

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guards there one day in Health and Safety, I said, "hey, this badge is dirty." I said, "we all take them home, we lay 'em up on the countertop or the dresser or someplace, the kids come along they grab them and they may chew on them or do anything. I don't think we should be taking those badges home if it's bad."

08:14:30

A:

They said, "well what we'll do, we'll build racks at the turnstile and you leave it there and you pick it up on the way to work." So that worked for about a year. Of course that blew over and we started bringing 'em home again. So, that was an experience. And about every day or two you stopped over at medical for a urine test if you was around a fire or anything which I believe, I don't know, I think I pointed that out before I went into the hospital.

08:15:04

A:

I don't know. I know a lot of the guys I used to tell 'em they used to go in there the little bottle they would get, they would put soap in it and shake it up with water and set it up there. I told 'em they should fire you guys for that. They either didn't know or they didn't check it, I don't know. That's some of the things that happened.

08:15:27

Q:

Can you tell us a little bit about the film badges, what they looked like and what was the sign?

A:

Well it was a little badge that hung, a little thing on the strip down the back of it. Now what it was I don't know but it was supposed to tell you how much uranium you were exposed to or how much you had in your system. You didn't question that you just wore it and turned it back in. At first I think it changed every week and then it got up to where you changed once a month.

08:15:58

A:

And they came in the shop once or twice and they'd tell you, that's after I went back in '82, when I was over in the hot stuff in Plant 9, that was the hot spot. And the Health and Safety people would come by, they carried these, they took your badges you know and they'd tell you if you was hot or not. So I complained one day about being hot and I went over in the front office and talked to I don't know who the guy was that I talked to.

08:16:27

A:

And he said, "my Health and Safety man didn't tell you that." I said, "yes he did, call him in here." I said, "he said I was hot." Of course a lot of the people if you got too hot they'd take you off of the job and put you out in the field or over in laundry someplace away from it. I never was that hot, they never did take me out. But when I told 'em that their man said I was hot he denied it and so did they. So I don't know.

08:17:00

Q:

Through your first stint at Fernald you worked on the screw machines (Comment – uh-huh) uh what plant

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was that in?

A:
Plant 6 machines.

Q:
And tell us what those machines did.

A:
Well those machines turned the OD from the slugs and cut them off at about 8, I think 8 inches, 125 _____ long and those one inch I think 150, 160 thousand OD, it roughed them down within 10 thousands. Then after they went through there they come back to the machine and we bored 'em for the holes in the center of 'em.

08:17:37

A:
Then from there after they got the hole in 'em they went to the _____ and was turned, turned down to within 1,000 OD. We had 1,000 each way plus or minus one. Then from there they went to the _____ machine heel machine which faced them and made 'em real pretty. And from there they went in boxes and I don't know where they went from there. They went out I know.

08:18:06

Q:
So those were the screw machines, and then when you were in Plant 9, that was during your second stint at Fernald? (Comment – yes) And what was your job there?

A:
When I first went in there I was on the _____ turning those big ingots 11, and 12, 15 hundred pound ingots. And then after I was on that for a while I went on the boring mill which bored a hole through the center of those big ingots. And then sent 'em out somewhere and got 'em extruded into rods into bars about that big around and they came back and we turned those.

08:18:38

A:
But I guess that was about the extent of that. Of course I was set-up man over there part of the time and part of the time I run the machine.

08:18:52

Q:
And what does a set-up man do?

A:
Makes certain the machines are on size and they're not broke down, everybody's getting production. That was pretty much Fernald especially Homer _____ God rest his soul, he was a good man but he was interested in production and so was all the rest of the supervisors. If you got your 1,000 pieces a night everybody was happy but if you didn't get that 1,000 people, pieces why there was nobody happy.

08:19:21

A:

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But like I said before some of the people could run that 1,000 pieces on _____ in 4 hours and had 4 hours to play. But some of them was slower than others it would take longer. I know some people would be working from whistle to whistle and still wouldn't get the production. Of course I used to, when I was running the _____ while I was operator, of course being a set-up man I used to changed gears in the machines so it would run faster.

08:19:53

A:

_____ go woop, woop, woop, you'd get you'd get done real fast. Fire flying everywhere but they was only interested in one thing, let's see it was 550 pieces to turn on a machine when you got your 550 pieces, everybody was happy.

08:20:13

Q:

Do you think their production was more important than safety back then?

A:

Yes it was. Sure it was. I don't think really safety in the early years meant too much. But after Westinghouse came in it got better. I don't know what Fluor Daniel did or FERMCO but I did work for FERMCO for a little bit. But it did get a lot better. They wouldn't let you work in the smoke. They used to shut the plant down when you'd get a fire in there.

08:20:54

A:

We used to get fires in our dust collectors. And the one fire we had out there, we had 150 drums of chips sittin' on the back slab back there and they all got on fire. It burnt the concrete right down, you couldn't put 'em out. Every time one of 'em would go off you could see that lead off of the top of the barrels would be sailing 50 foot in the air, crackin' you know.

08:21:22

A:

You know when you get a barrel of chips, a barrel of uranium on fire you can't put it out, it burns out. You got nothin' left but a little handful of black oxide. We used to have a, I don't know if it's still there but it was when I left there, a metal building built and it had a big drum in there full of water, then the water just kept pouring in there.

08:21:42

A:

They'd take these barrels, the fork truck driver would grab them and set 'em in that barrel. And the water was just boiling but most of the time it didn't put them out. It'd still burn.

08:21:54

Q:

And this is in Plant 9?

A:

Plant 9 and 6.

Q:

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And 6.

A:
Uh, huh.

08:21:59

Q:
Tell us about the rolling mill.

A:
Well, the rolling mill was a lot of salt, the salt was terrible. The rolling mill would get those ingots when they were 15, 1600 pounds and they would roll them into small rock and from there they'd go over to the _____. Of course, after they went back the second time the rolling mill had been shut down.

08:22:25

A:
They weren't rolling anymore but they would just heat and treat, heat treat the small slugs and the bars and that's what I did when I went back the second time, run the salt furnace.

08:22:38

Q:
Tell us a little bit about how that operates and what exactly the salt furnace is there for.

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A:

Well it was to heat treat the ingots. I don't know, they never told us how much or why they did it but I know it made 'em harder, the slugs harder. You put 'em in there those ingots would be red hot when they come out of that salt furnace.

08:22:58

A:

Then you'd, the salt furnace here then the cooling tank here. You'd take 'em out of that salt and put 'em in that water and that salt would hit the ceiling, crack, pop heard 'em awful. Then you'd leave 'em in there 'til they cooled and you'd take 'em out put 'em on skids then they went to the roll-, they didn't go to the rolling mill, like I said the rolling mill was shut down, they'd send 'em out somewhere and get 'em extruded. Into tubes about this big around after the mill shut down. And that was about the end of that.

08:23:31

Q:

Tell us about the mysterious disappearance in Plant 6.

A:

Well I was operating, I was the operator on that salt and bath at the time. It's the furnace, I called it salt bath because that's what we did, we put the ingots in there and heat-treated 'em really. I went into work that, I was working second shift and the third shift didn't run, they didn't have a third shift on the salt bath.

08:23:58

A:

Had a day shift and second shift. And when we would leave there at night they had a big lid that went down over that. Did you ever see the tank out there? Well you know what it looks like. We had a lid was about yeah thick and it fit over top of that and you'd pick it up with a crane and you'd put it on top to hold heat in.

08:24:19

A:

Now when we came back to work I know I put the lid on it that night when I left there. I went back to work the next evening and they were looking for this man, somebody was missing. And uh when Kenny Inman went in there the next morning and took the lid off and that he said the top of the thing had well black stuff it looked like a man's shape or something.

08:24:43

A:

Of course everybody kind of laughed about that but when I started dippin' ingots that afternoon when I went to work there was something wrong with the salt. You could tell there was because when the ingot come out it looked real uh, real, I don't know, not the way it should look.

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08:24:57

A:

'Cause when you dipped 'em before they come out real black and they were kind of a grey lookin' color. And they decided then that something was in there. So of course they shut it down and when it cooled that salt gets hard and they took jackhammers and busted it out. And they did find the man's steel toe shoes and his car keys and the rims of his glasses.

08:25:27

A:

And they tried to tell me all the time he put himself in there but I often told 'em, tried to make a joke out of it as I could, that he took that lid off and climbed in there then put it back. Of course you know he didn't but how he got in there I'll never know. He didn't get in there by himself, I'll say that. You can't crawl in a hole that big (holding hands about a foot apart) when that salt is so hot. 'Cause you couldn't get within 20 foot of it, it'd melt your skin off of you.

08:26:00

Q:

Do you have any suspicions about that incident?

A:

Well if I do I'd like to keep 'em to myself.

Q:

That's fine. Just thought I'd ask. Um, tell us a little more about um what was done in Plant 9 so we can understand what part of the process Plant 9 played.

08:26:23

A:

Well Plant 9 had the big machines over there like the _____ lays and the boiler mills and they was just a machine and they machined just like Plant 6 did only they had bigger machines. We machined tubes and ingots and over in Plant 6 we mostly just machined rods, turned them to small slugs. But Plant 9 also had a chemical, half of it was chemical and half was machinery.

08:26:51

A:

So that's all I know about that. I know they had an explosion over there. I wasn't there when it happened but one man got killed. And it burnt the other man real bad up on top of the, of one of the chemical tanks blew. When I used to leave when it was cold a lot of 'em would go through Plant 5, that's the chemical plant. I used to shun it, I was always scared it was gonna blow up but I don't know why.

08:27:25

A:

Nobody told me it was gonna do it but I was just scared of it. I used to walk through the rain instead of going through there. It was quite a ways from the plant over to the lunchroom. But I don't know it's, it was something else, but all in all I guess it wasn't that bad.

08:27:50

Q:

So in mid '80's uh there was quite a stir that there were dust collector leaks in Plant 9, that had release

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material out into the environment, um you worked right out in that plant.

A:

Right under those dust collectors.

Q:

Tell us about that.

08:28:07

A:

Well, the machine, they'd take the inspection department, all of them, and they'd sit there with a needle and thread and sew these bags. The bags would get holes in 'em and they'd sew 'em up and they'd put 'em back in the dust collector of course with salt and stuff was going through there, it'd eat those bags up right away.

08:28:32

A:

And it'd start going out again. They'd shut it down again and they'd pull those bags were big and they'd bring 'em out, all the people from the inspection department sat there and sew 'em up again. But after, it was back in '82 why they got all new dust collectors and I don't know what happened after that. But I thought it was funny take 30 or 40 people and sit 'em down there and sew bags, got needle and thread sewing those bags.

08:29:05

Q:

About how big were the bags?

A:

Oh those bags was probably 20 foot long, they were big I know that. And if you go around 'em I would say they was 10 foot around. They went in those big dust collectors. And they was to take the dust out before it went out in the atmosphere. But of course, when they busted, got holes in them, it went right on out and went down on the roof and supposedly only went five miles. They have their story and I have mine. But I think it went further but I don't know.

08:29:45

Q:

We're going to pause for a second here 'cause we're going to change tapes. You're doing great.

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TAPE FLHP0172

09:01:03

Q:

Okay, so you've probably seen some pictures of uh, um cleanup and what's going on at Fernald now and some of the very areas that you were in not wearing any protective gear, guys that are completely dressed out, how does that make you feel?

09:01:20

A:

Well it makes me feel that somebody either lied to me or they surely didn't tell me the truth. Like I think I said before **when you're working for the government you would think that they wouldn't put you in a spot that would hurt you. But I believe now they did.** And when the lawsuit was filed like I said before, I was one of the 10 complaintants, they fought us all the way through court.

09:01:50

A:

No, it didn't hurt ya, there's nothing that would hurt ya. But when I walk out there now and I see all these people walking around that are dressed up with air respirators on and can't get within two miles of it, it makes me feel pretty bad. Because somebody did a bunch of people wrong. I don't know what will happen farther on down the line but uh I'm hoping something will but maybe it will maybe it won't.

09:02:25

Q:

If you could go back 30 or 40 or 50 years and talk to somebody from the uh AEC, the Atomic Energy Commission about fighting people the way that they did, what would you say to them?

A:

I would say they're either foolish or the people you're hiring is foolish. I think I told you before if you had more than a third or fourth grade education they didn't hire you anyhow. Because I believe now knowing what I know today that they were scared that you might find out what they were doing.

09:03:01

A:

I used to kid people from Indiana all the time, if you're a Hoosier all you got to do is come in and say well I'm a Hoosier, you got a job 'cause they're kind of wondering around anyhow. (Laughter) But I used to get in a lot of arguments about that.

09:03:22

Q:

Tell us a little bit about the uh, the class action lawsuit.

A:

Well, the class action lawsuit, I guess it started over my insurance. When I left there they cancelled my insurance, my hospitalization. They said I was not there long enough or something happened, I didn't qualify. At first they let us pay it. It was high but you don't live without hospitalization and we were paying it every month.

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09:03:59

A:

And it got, they put me in a bad, what they called it, a risk and it was so high I couldn't afford it. But I still tried to pay it all the time. Then we were sitting one day, the wife and I, well to start with I tried to get insurance and they said well you worked at Fernald and that's the first I ever knew it was bad. They said you can't buy insurance. I said how come. He said well you worked at Fernald.

09:04:27

A:

I said yes I did, 24 years. They said that's the highest risk place to work. And that's what started the lawsuit. It took a long time to get ten people to go down to, as witnesses. 'Course we didn't win anything but we didn't lose. What little money we got, you couldn't get nobody to help. Everybody said we can't afford to. We sat in the courtroom down there one time five weeks I was sittin' in front of a jury.

09:05:12

A:

And you'd look around the courtroom and see just one or two people from 4500 people that was involved in the lawsuit. 'Course you could see the jury they'd look around we're suing 'em for \$500 million of course we didn't get it. But anyhow the jury would look around every morning, you'd see one or two people and I know what they had on their mind.

09:05:31

A:

Here's ten people suing the government and there's 4500 people involved why are they not here in the courtroom. So you'd go out and beg 'em to show up. We can't afford it, we can't afford the \$10 parking. So I went to Stan Chesley and I said to Stan these people said they would show up in the courtroom if they could afford to park.

09:05:58

A:

And he said well have them all park in the Central Trust building and I'll sign their ticket it'll cost them nothing. And they still wouldn't show up. But the only witness that National Lead had was Adams, Weldon Adams. Stan Chesley asked him one day he said why are you the only witness, said how much is National Lead paying you to be a witness?

09:06:21

A:

He said oh, they're not paying me anything he said I'm just doing it because I like my job, said they give me a good job for 30 years, this is a payback. Well I knew better, I thought I did. And I asked Stan Chesley, I said now tomorrow when we get back in court, of course this is after court is over, I said ask him to bring his W-2 forms in.

09:06:45

A:

Well he did and Judge Spiegel said yeah, says bring 'em him, he says have them here tomorrow. Adam dropped his glasses and broke him. He said, I can't do that. Spiegel said yes, you have them here tomorrow and said I want them since 1985 up to date. So he brought 'em in. And of course Stan Chesley

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had 'em in his hand and he said to Adams said would you like to put this on the board or put 'em up where people can see it?

09:07:09

A:

Of course he wouldn't. Stan said well I'll do it. So he got \$499,000 for fighting our lawsuit, the employees, he got \$135,000 for fighting Lisa Crawford lawsuit. So that's what Adams got. So he could afford to sit there and tell a few lies. If he lied I don't know. And when I went down and gave my deposition page that thick (holds fingers apart to demonstrate thickness) I went in front of five different shrinks.

09:07:48

A:

I call 'em shrinks. Trying to prove me nuts. Said you're nuts for trying to sue Fernald. I said well maybe I am but you'll have to prove that. And from there we went to court. But you couldn't get nobody to do nothing, nobody'd help ya. And another thing I didn't like about the lawsuit, we had a jury trial. All of the sudden we went in there one day and they said well we're sending the jury home.

09:08:20

A:

I said how come. They said I want you and Mr. Webb and two other people to stay. Well we stayed and Ms. Rosell, she was one of the attorneys, she said we're going to come back Monday. She said everybody come back Monday. Went back Monday and sent 'em all home again and she kept the three of us again. She said we got everything we asked for so we sent the jury home.

09:08:48

A:

Of course I was mad about that. I said if you got a jury trial that's have the jury trial because if we don't get anything than the attorneys don't get nothing. But they sent 'em home and settled it and I was awful upset about that but it didn't do much good. And she kept three of us again. Then when we went down she told us what we got. I really got upset but that didn't do any good either. I said fifteen million dollars, buncha thieves. But that's the way it ended up.

09:09:23

Q:

So they settled out of court?

A:

Settled out of court.

Q:

For?

A:

Fifteen million dollars.

Q:

And that was for all 4500?

09:09:30

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A:

That was for everybody and Stan Chesley got 33 and a third which was 5 million. We got ten. So it was nothing really but like I say, we didn't lose. Everybody kept telling me when I go down to Ross and try to talk to people down there, they say well now if you sign that you're going to lose your home, they're going to take your home, Stan Chesley's going to take your home.

09:09:58

A:

You're going to lose your home. Now if you sign it you're going to lose your home. 'Cause he's going to make you pay the bill if he loses; which I don't know if he will or not but at the least he said if we don't win they get nothing if we do win they get 33 and a third percent which is the way of all attorneys. Nobody lost their home but we didn't win much either.

09:10:19

Q:

After the settlement did you feel vindicated?

A:

I felt terrible. I felt it was absolutely nothing. When the people that never was inside the plant got 78 million and was no closer than the fence. We worked in there, straddled that stuff, sat on it, eat it and everything else for 25, 24, 25 years and you walk out with nothing. The people that lived around there got much, much more than we got. But maybe we had nothing coming. If they hadn't lied to us, we wouldn't have had.

09:11:13

Q:

Did the government admit that they were wrong?

A:

They do now. They didn't then. Not in court they didn't. They had a little, a little attorney they had; I forget what his name was, I'll think of it in a minute, but anyhow he was the best attorney ever I saw. He made Stan Chesley and them look sick. He was a little bitty guy. I used to tell him all the time, I got a 12-year-old kid, I always kidded with him, I ain't got no sense.

09:11:33

A:

I said now when you get done with that suit I got a 12-year-old boy I want to have that suit, and just as soon as I beat you in court I'm gonna buy you a steak. And he said I won't let you forget it either. What was his name? We used to kid each other. He said wait till I get you on the stand Webb, he said I'm going to tear you up good.

09:11:55

A:

Well I don't like the way they did it to start with. When you give a deposition I guess you have to do that though. They take your deposition which hell mine is that thick (holds fingers apart demonstrating thickness). They gave it to the other side, the other attorney, and he went through it and he only asked you the questions he wanted you to answer.

09:12:13

A:

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And you only said yes or no. You didn't talk about anything. But they let Weldon Adams sit on the stand for 7 days and talk for 8, 10 hours a day but they let us say yes or no. I didn't like that either but we're the plaintiffs.

09:12:35

Q:

Did you have to go on the stand during the trial?

A:

Yes I did.

Q:

Tell us a little bit about that experience, what were some of the questions they asked you?

09:12:45

A:

Well they only asked me I believe four questions. And I answered yes or no. When I started to tell them what had happened; see I tried to get my son a job there and that's one of things that was in my deposition. That I wasn't scared of it or at the least I wouldn't want to harm my son in there. When I started telling them, just answer yes or no Mr. Webb.

09:13:10

A:

"Was you scared of Fernald? Did you know what happened at Fernald?" "No I didn't." You start to talk about it, "just yes or no Mr. Webb." Because they already had my deposition and they knew what was there and they wouldn't let you talk about it. Or none the rest of 'em either. It was all the same, answer yes or no. What was that little dude's name?

09:13:37

A:

But anyhow after the trial was over I said, "well, you didn't beat us we won half." I said, "I just have to buy you a half of a steak dinner." And I said, "I still want that suit." But I didn't get it. So you put a little fun with everything you do. If you didn't it would make an awful long day.

09:13:57

Q:

During your deposition you said you had to talk to a lot of psychiatrists and uh.

A:

I talked to five different psychiatrists.

Q:

What kind of questions were they asking you?

09:14:08

A:

Well they said they thought I was nuts for suing the government. I didn't know. And they asked you what went on out there and I didn't know; what are you gonna do? You can't say well this happened and that happened. You can tell 'em what you did, but you didn't know, your right hand didn't know what

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your left one was doing really.

09:14:26

A:

I knew it was uranium. I knew that Lisa Crawford had had it in her well and I knew it was in all the papers saying it wasn't dangerous. But it was never dangerous when we worked there.

09:14:41

Q:

So that was the mid '80's (Comment – yeap) when all the media attention came down and that was like just directly before you filed your lawsuit? (Comment – uh-huh) Um, tell us again a little bit about uh the media attention that was going on at Fernald and is that the moment that you realized that there may be uh danger there?

09:14:58

A:

Yeap, that's when we realized it because it would come out in the paper one week that such and such doctor said it's bad, that it will kill you. And the very next day National Lead would come back and contradict it with their doctors and say no it won't hurt you. This doctor doesn't know what he's talking about, this guy does. So you don't know who to believe. But that's when we started thinking that we were working in some bad stuff.

09:15:35

Q:

Do you recall that moment, the very first moment, were you shocked to understand finally that it was dangerous, were you shocked and how did it make you feel about the government?

A:

I feel the government lied to us. They didn't tell us what they should have. But then I think I said before, maybe if they would have told us we would have not worked there. And again, we had to have the bomb, if we hadn't have got the bomb and Russia or China or somebody else would have got it, we would have been a dictator today, I think.

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09:16:15

A:

Our grandkids and myself and everybody else wouldn't be going free the way we are today. So it makes me feel a little bit better when I start thinking on those lines. And I think that most people that worked there feel the same way. But it does shock you real bad when you know people worked you places and if they knew, now Wes Mahaffie got blamed with a lot of that and Wes shot himself.

09:16:49

A:

When they had all these leaks there, Wes was working in that plant. But Wes was doing just exactly what he was told to do and so was Homer Cole, they're both dead now. And they had never told us it would hurt us and of course they knew the bag was leaking. We knew they were leaking too. Everybody worked there knew it, but it wouldn't hurt ya.

09:17:10

A:

So people keep saying no it ain't gonna hurt you, you get more from your watch or the sun than you can possibly get from here. Well, you don't worry too much about it after you heard it 24, 25 years. It's like I said before, when I was in the roofing business we was building houses in the roofing business, you go up on a five story building when you first go up there and the roof is like this (holds hands in a temple position) you're holding on for dear life.

09:17:33

A:

Afraid you're going to fall but after you're up there for three or four hours you get used to it and you're running around up there like you're crazy. You forget about falling and that's what happened at Fernald. After you worked there for so long people said no it won't hurt you, it won't hurt you, it won't hurt you, nothing here can hurt you. Why, you just forget about it hurting you and you go to work.

09:17:55

Q:

So after the lawsuit happened um did you get involved with FRESH?

A:

Yes I did.

Q:

Can you tell us about that?

09:18:09

A:

Well, we have a lot of meetings and we have a lot of doctors come to FRESH. Uh well I just go to listen to them really. They talk still over my head and they talk over FRESH's head too. When you take these highly educated people start talking all about uranium does and how it's made and how long it'll last and the daughters and the sons and the other people, I know nothing about that.

09:18:40

A:

And I don't think FRESH does either. I used to tell 'em in the meetings, the meetings used to say when

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uh some of the other people was there, "well Webb if we can ever satisfy you we'll have it made." I said, "when you make it just as clean as it was before you started out here then you're going to satisfy Webb." But I said, "don't think you'll never do that." "How clean do you want it?"

09:19:03

A:

"I want it just like it was the day you moved in here." And that's how clean it's supposed to be. But that'll never happen.

09:19:16

Q:

What were some of the biggest challenges that FRESH had to face, especially in the early, early years?

A:

Well everybody called Lisa Crawford a nut. Said she's crazy, said she doesn't know what she's talking about, you can't win a lawsuit, there's nothing wrong here. 'Course nobody knew. She found thorium in her well, that was the start of it.

09:19:38

A:

Well when she found thorium in her well of course I don't know who she talked to but I'm sure she talked to National Lead and they wouldn't do nothing about it so she sued 'em. And she had a terrible time getting people to go to court, nobody would go. They just stand back and let her do the work and call her bad names and talk to her terrible.

09:20:00

A:

And they still do. And she's still fighting every day trying to get the place cleaned up. I don't think she's doing a thing wrong. But the other girls work hard too in the FRESH group. I just pay dues and go to the meetings and take up for Lisa.

09:20:21

Q:

Tell me about a few of the battles that you've had to fight with people about Lisa.

A:

Well people like I say I know a lot of people, when Lisa filed a lawsuit of course they shut the plant down shortly after that. They said she caused us to lose our jobs, she's just a stupid old woman. I said to start with, Lisa's not an old woman and I said she may be stupid but she's not an old woman. I said she's fighting for you, don't forget it.

09:20:48

A:

If you get down there and help her you'll find out what she did to really _____. But still you couldn't get nobody to the meetings. I guess I should go back to the settlement. We had nobody in court but after the settlement was made we had a meeting out here at Strickers Grove. How many people do you think

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we had there? 1250. Where do I sign for my check?

09:21:17

A:

I said, "I didn't realize you had a check coming fellow?" "Oh yeah, we had a lawsuit didn't we?" "And I spent 5 years just about 5 weeks one time in front of a jury and 3 weeks another time in front of a jury and I looked through the courtroom every morning, I see nobody's face." "Yeah, but we just couldn't get there."

09:21:37

A:

I said, "you couldn't? How'd you get here today?" I said, "why don't you go back home this is a cornfield you're not in front of a jury and you're not in front of Judge Spiegel. This is not a place to fight a battle." "Where do I sign for my money?" That's all they're interested in. They're not interested in their health or my health or anybody else's. They're interested in what check they got.

09:22:08

A:

When they made the settlement, I was all for if you're gonna get physicals, if they find something wrong well why doesn't the government pay for your sickness? If you have to go to the hospital why don't they pay your bill? I can take \$850 and go to any doctor in this town and get a physical. But they shot me down on that pretty fast.

09:22:40

Q:

Let's talk a little bit about the medical monitoring program. How did that come about?

A:

Well that was set up, that was part of the settlement. I guess Judge Spiegel decided, I'm sure he's the one that thought about it and I'm sure he's still fighting the only way that they'll know what happened to people out there is set up this medical monitoring and once a year you'll get a physical.

09:23:03

A:

And they ask you all these questions each year and they keep a record of ya. That's what medical monitoring is for. I don't feel it's for my health, it's for the government to know what happened to the people that worked at National Lead. 'Cause I don't believe they give a hoot what happens to me. If they did, they'd pay my hospital bill when I wind up in the hospital.

09:23:29

A:

You understand what I'm saying? But I fought hard for that. I said if you want to give us a physical if you find some of us sick and if it was caused from National Lead than at least pay the hospital bill. But they don't do that either. And I think that's wrong. And the doctors that they set up of course the union set up one and Judge Spiegel set up the other two.

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09:24:04

A:

But like my doctor told me, she said, "you go for a physical once a year," she said, "which is fine." She said, "it's a good physical," it's a woman doctor and she said, "but they don't know your history. I know your history." She said, "I see you once a week for a while than I see you every two or three months." She said, "I know what's happening to you, they don't."

09:24:32

A:

"They only know what's happened each year if any changes is made." And she got all upset when that one woman told me that Napricin was causing my kidney problems 'cause I have some bad kidneys, real bad kidneys. And I told the doctor about that and she said she's nuts. She said there's no way that Napricin will cause your kidney problems.

09:24:58

A:

And I talked to the girl that gives the physical down at medical monitoring. I said, "could 5 milligrams, 500 milligrams of Prednisone once a day cause my kidney problems?" She said, "absolutely not." I said, "well why are you fighting us the way you are?" But that's as far as that went.

09:25:19

Q:

What are some of the health problems that uh you and some of the people that you know or knew have?

A:

Well, most of 'em died with cancer, lungs, heart problems, blood problems. Now it's not swollen too bad right now but it'll get up (pulling pants leg up) this big. I don't know that, I can't say Fernald did it. I can't say they didn't but I feel they did. I have high blood pressure something fierce.

09:25:52

A:

It is under control now but they used to send me home from the plant. I'd go in to work and they would have a card stuck in the, in your rack by your card, report to medical. I'd go over and get a blood pressure and it was sky high. They'd send me home. Well, I'd go down to my doctor which _____ Dr. Swimni, I don't know if he knew how to read or not and he'd say oh it's fine.

09:26:21

A:

I'd go back to work and they'd say sky high. So one day my wife and I was out walking and we came by Mercy Hospital, Mercy South and I said let's go in and get a blood pressure. I didn't feel too bad but didn't feel real good. She sat me down and she put the cuff on me and pumped it up, she said, "don't move." I said, "what's the problem?" She said, "either this thing is tore up or you shouldn't be walking."

09:26:45

A:

She said, "are you dizzy, can you stand up?" I said, "I walked in here didn't I." She said, "I don't believe

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you're walking." She said, "wait until I get another cuff." She come back she said, "it's 245 on both ends Mr. Webb." Said, "don't get out of that chair until I get you a doctor." So from there I went to a doctor and started taking high blood pressure medicine and it's been high every since.

09:27:07

A:

But it's down to normal now and I hope I can keep it there. Now whether Fernald did that or not I don't know but a lot of 'em has high blood pressure from Fernald. They have heart trouble, a lot of 'em has heart trouble. And lots of 'em has cancer. And I was in a meeting over at Harrison and they had the doctors there and they say that the radon is probably worse than the uranium.

09:27:39

A:

And said it does cause some kinds of cancer but he didn't say what kind. But later on I hear it does cause kidney problems. That's what it works on the first part it works on is your kidneys and your lungs. As far as I know my lungs are good but I do have kidney problems.

09:28:03

Q:

Tell about chemicals at Fernald, what kind of the chemicals at Fernald were you uh concerned about?

A:

I wasn't concerned of any chemicals when I worked at Fernald because they kept telling me they wouldn't hurt ya. Will not hurt you.

Q:

When you look back.

09:28:19

A:

When I look back well I got a paper that long (holding hands apart to demonstrate length) of all the chemicals we worked in. I couldn't name 'em if I had the paper. But there's a lot of stuff out there we worked in that would kill ya. I see it will now but I didn't know it then. I, they want to know what was in those uh pits out there.

09:28:50

A:

I could tell them a lot of stuff. There's coveralls, there's ingots, there's parts of trucks, there's parts of Ford trucks. There's gloves, there's everything else in there 'cause we threw it in there. But it won't hurt ya. Stuff won't hurt you boys just go ahead and get a bath make sure you take a bath each day. We got two baths a day. My wife said I was pretty clean at that time now I guess I won't take a bath. If you take two baths a day for 25 years why afraid it will wash the pretty off of ya.

09:28:22

Q:

We're gonna pause right there and change tapes.

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TAPE FLHP0173

11:01:01

A:

I got throwed out of one of the retirement meetings because I called Rudy Crawford a liar and I still call him a liar. He started telling me first one thing or another and this didn't happen and so many people told him this and he didn't give a deposition I guess which I know he did. I told him he was a liar and the next thing I know the police was tapping me on the shoulder.

11:01:26

A:

Took me outside and I asked him, "what's your problem?" He said, "well you're not allowed in here." I said, "why not?" "Well, you're not an employee." I said, "I'm not an employee? Worked there 25 years." I said, "this is for the hourly employees." I said, "we started this meeting." I said, "who told you I wasn't an employee?" "Well, Rudy Crawford."

11:01:54

A:

I said, "well you better check it out." So the policeman took my drivers' license and he came back and he said now, he told the other policeman I was standing by, "here's a man that worked at Fernald for 25 years." He said, "he has not one black mark against him anywhere anyplace, license or otherwise." The officer said, "you go back inside but don't hit Rudy Crawford." I said, "I'm not going to hit Rudy Crawford."

11:02:27

Q:

So what other types of uh, what are some of the other things that some of the workers, especially when you received some money from some of the attorneys, what kind of feedback did you get from some of the other workers about that?

11:02:41

A:

Well some of the workers said we had the wrong people on there to start with. I said, well why didn't we get somebody that was not wrong. 'Cause we begged everybody to come down to be a part of it. About the only feedback we got, they didn't, they weren't satisfied with the ten plaintiffs getting the \$20,000. They were upset about that the most.

11:03:05

A:

Some of 'em wasn't but most of 'em was. And that's about all the feedback we got from that. They weren't uh well I guess maybe they were satisfied. 'Cause if somebody walks up and hands you an eight thousand dollar check well I'd be as happy as I could be about it if I didn't have to do nothing for it. I believe they think National Lead just walked up and gave 'em this money because they liked 'em.

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11:03:35

A:

I keep telling people they didn't give you that money because they liked you they gave you that money through court. We fought hard for that and we earned all of it. But that's about all the feed-, I don't get any feedback any more about it. I know some of the guys like Pete _____ his wife died with cancer and he has bad lungs from he worked back in the degreaser with all the acid and everything.

11:04:04

A:

His wife died but he won't even talk about it. I often try to get him to come to meetings and talk about it, he might feel better. But he won't so that's the way that is.

11:04:20

Q:

Now you mentioned to me that there was uh that Fernald had a body that they don't want to release. (Comment – no) Tell us that story.

A:

Well the papers in there some-, the story is he was in Plant 6. He was Quality Control. He worked in final, they had final inspectors and Quality Control inspectors. As far as I know he got into something and he died that night.

11:04:46

A:

That's what I was told. I didn't see what he got into and I don't know what he got into. But I know the coroner has still got his body and they won't release it. Now whether it's too hot for the, for the graveyard to take him or what it is I don't know. But his wife says they still will not release his body to her to bury him or anything.

11:05:15

Q:

And uh, what period of time did that happen?

A:

Well I don't know. That was after I went, I don't recall if that was under National Lead. That must have been the last part of, before '79. After 15 or 20 years you kind of forget a lot of stuff. But I do know his body is still there. But he was working over in by the Cross machine. That was his job, to inspect the slugs as they come off the Cross machine.

11:06:00

A:

And my job was, when they come off the Cross machine if the size wasn't, if the OD was wrong or the ID was wrong, was to make certain that the machine run 'em right. 'Cause he was the final inspector up at the other end, they called him Quality Control. From there of course back in the back there was final inspectors but they're all the same people.

11:06:23

A:

I went up and bought a paper which I have in there on that. Now I did not talk to his wife but my

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neighbor across the street knows his wife real well. Jane_____. And that's about all I know about that.

11:06:49

Q:

How do you feel about the cleanup that's going on at Fernald right now?

A:

Well, like I told Gary Stegner, I feel that now that he got in, I did not know Gary before but I knew he was over the proving ground over in Indiana. He talked to me before he hired in at Fernald at a meeting I was in.

11:07:14

A:

I used to attend a lot of meetings. He said, "how long is this going to last out here Webb?" I said, "it'll probably last 15 or 20." He said, "I have a chance to come there." That's when they shut the proving ground down. Well my wife's brother's son worked for him. I guess that's how come I met Gary Stegner. He said, "I believe I'll take the job if it's going to last that long." He was out of retirement.

11:07:40

A:

So Gary came in there. And after Gary came in, actually they started doing a lot of things that they weren't doing before. And I always give Gary a lot of credit, maybe I just like him I don't know. But he does one good job I think. I believe they're doing the best job that they possibly can do. But deep down I don't believe they can ever clean it up.

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11:08:13

A:

I really don't like what happened to the Girl Scout camp. You know they shut it down. Now all of the sudden it's clean and they're building houses over there. Now you know and I know it is not clean. If uranium lasts as long as they say it does, it'll never be clean.

11:08:36

A:

And I believe in ten or 15 years there'll be houses built all over the 1,001 acres that National Lead owns out there, the government owns.

11:08:52

Q:

Once those buildings come down, what would you like to see done with that land?

A:

Well, they came make a game reserve out of it. I surely don't want to make no, no _____ or playground for the children and I think that's what they want to do. They should keep a fence around it I think. But again I say that's not where it's at. There's just as much in Cincinnati well maybe not as much, or Hamilton or Dayton or other places as there is right here or in the river.

11:09:31

A:

I don't believe they'll do, they'll make a game reserve will be all right. That way you can keep a fence around it and keep the people away from it. But I still go out there and buy the vegetables. They grow the best vegetables in the country. I guess that uranium makes 'em taste better. That's what I tell 'em anyhow. (Laughter) I know those farmers got awful upset there at first when Lisa Crawford first filed a lawsuit.

11:09:58

A:

Well we was hollering about, we used to have cattle come right up in the buildings and pick grass and they had a dairy sit right out there at the end of the road there on Willey Road. And they milked those cows and they sent that uranium all over the country. But it wouldn't hurt ya. They kept telling ya it wouldn't hurt ya. But I think they found out further down the line it will hurt ya.

11:10:36

Q:

Is there anything that we didn't cover that you wanted to cover? Anything you want to say?

A:

I can't not think of it. I think there's probably a lot. You know as your little computer, I have a very small computer but it keeps kicking out little things. Like Homer Crow used to say, "Webb, how do you go to a meeting if you don't take, you don't write it down, you don't mark it down but when you come back you know every word that we said?"

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11:11:04

A:

I said, "well I stick it in a little computer up there in my head." I said, "it kicks it out a lot." "I hope he knows you have one." "Mine don't work just right sometimes but sometimes it works." When your computer is working best is early morning. When you first get out of bed all these things is just flying through your head. I'm sure you had the same experience.

11:11:25

A:

That's your computer kicking out things that you should know that you forget during the day. And I believe as you get older why your computer slows up.

11:11:37

Q:

I think mine could use a tune-up. (Laughter) All right we're going to do this thing now, it's called nat, natural sound. You wanna go ahead and roll natural sound now? Okay if we could just have quite on the set for about 30 seconds uh we just need to get room tone. Uh, this is nat sound.